The Malcolm X Files

The 1950s were a particularly turbulent time in United States history due to the mounting tensions over civil rights, the increasing presence of Islam within the country, and the growing fears of communism in the east. The general fear of what was “un-American” at the time brought Malcolm X to the FBI’s attention in 1950 when he openly admitted to being a Communist in a letter, and as a result, brought his other activities under closer scrutiny. Their initial notice of his potential communist associations led to their discovery of his devotion to the NOI, or the “Nation of Islam”, and in 1953, suspicious of his activities, the FBI began surveillance.

The FBI’s file on Malcolm X and his occupations accurately reflected their own priorities of rooting out the potentially harmful influence of outside countries within the U.S., creating a profile that was especially attentive to his suspected connections to the Communist Party and the Nation of Islam. They collected general information, such as his address, appearance, and birth, but also more personal information, such as records of his criminal history and communist and Islamic beliefs, convinced that he was a potential danger. Given the FBI’s fears at the time, having knowledge of his history, correspondence, and personal beliefs would have been useful information in discerning whether or not Malcolm X posed a threat by using his past actions to predict his future ones.

The FBI came to the correct conclusion that Malcolm X was a dangerous individual, partially basing this off his connections with what is labeled as the “Muslim Cult of Islam”, an organization antagonistic towards the law and values of the United States. They also marked him as a “subject of a Communist Index Card” on their records, clearly thinking his communist ideals were significant. The documentation about Malcolm X proved to be persuasive through the extensive knowledge of his history and actions that clearly show Malcolm X to have potential motives against the United States as a whole, as being a member of the Islamic group implied Malcolm X “[disavowed] [his] allegiance to the United States.” However, there is evidence of prejudice in the report, as the organization is referred to as a “cult”, while the members of the organization call themselves a “temple”. The use of the word “cult” signifies the FBI’s distaste for the organization, and may have influenced their judgement regarding their activities. Though there are signs of prejudice towards the organization and its beliefs, the documents the FBI provided showed no signs of discriminatory actions  taken towards Malcolm X himself.

Because of his connections and beliefs, the FBI kept tabs on Malcolm X for the rest of his life. Malcolm X contributed significantly to the chaos surrounding the 1950s and continued to be monitored, but was never recorded to have any particularly treasonous activities against the U.S. government. His controversial life through the eyes of the FBI agents provided remarkable insight to the tense atmosphere of the 1950s..